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1997 Wallace Wurth Memorial Lecture
Human Rights and Rule of Law, Principles Vs Realpolitik

by José Ramos-Horta

1996 Nobel Peace Prize Co-Laureate
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Vice-Chancellor, Prof. John Niland
Dear colleagues and friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the Vice-Chancellor for the kind invitation extended to me to deliver the 1997 Wallace Wurth Memorial Lecture, a privilege extended to a number of much more outstanding individuals than I, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet and Prof. Noam Chomsky. I feel humbled and a little intimidated, knowing that I cannot hope to offer the same depth and quality of discourse.

As a visiting professor at the university, I am honoured to be associated with this prestigious institution and its highly respected and dedicated faculty staff.

I first visited the campus in 1988 when, after almost 15 years in the United States, I decided to migrate to Australia. I arrived with no material possessions. But I brought along an idea that was germinating in my mind since 1983 when I attended a human rights program in Strasbourg, France.

The only contact I had at this university was with a pleasant Australian academic I had the pleasure to meet in a small gathering of friends in Geneva a few years earlier. I am not usually a diligent collector of business cards, but in this instance I did keep the one that was given to me by that kind professor.

So when I arrived in Australia to reunite with the only sister and brother I had outside East Timor at the time, I visited the gentleman who had given me his card, Prof. Garth Nettheim of the Law Faculty. When I phoned him to seek a meeting, he answered most warmly and invited me to his office the next day.

I put to Garth the idea of establishing a very practical human rights training program aimed at acquainting and empowering those working in non-government organisations in the Asia-Pacific region. He enthusiastically endorsed the idea, and introduced me to people without whom the now well-established Diplomacy Training Program could not have become a reality.

John Scott-Murphy in particular was a tireless and dedicated co-founder of DTP. I could not fail to mention my friends Tony Simpson, David Bitel, David Weisdbrot and Patricia Hyndman, on whom I counted on to make the DTP a reality.

We owe much to many Australian, European and Canadian NGOs and funding bodies who embraced the project.

The then pro-vice-chancellor and Dean of the Law School, Ivan Shearer, also gave enthusiastic support. The UNSW Law Faculty must be credited for its consistent support of the DTP.

I wish also to acknowledge the presence of three dynamic women who are the brains as well as the power behind DTP today - Susan Armstrong, our no-nonsense chairperson, Jane Brock, the interim Executive Director, on whom befalls the challenge of keeping DTP on track, and Sarah Pritchard. Two other powerful women are members of the board: Hillary Charlesworth and Joann Schmider, based in Canberra. Three humble men -- Patrick Walsh, Mick Dodson and I -- serve under these five powerful women. We always agree with them. Who would dare not to?

I am not used to appearing before such a distinguished audience. I would have preferred that someone other than I had been here today. Perhaps Xanana Gusmão, a gifted poet, writer and journalist, and the undisputed leader of the Timorese people. I sometimes suspect that he is a reincarnation of the revolutionary romantic El Che who died 30 years ago in the jungles of Bolivia.

Xanana cannot be here today because he is serving a 20-year prison sentence in a foreign land. Almost a month ago today, Xanana was summoned from his Cipinang prison cell in Jakarta for a meeting that is the dream of many mortals, a meeting with one of the most extraordinary individuals this century has

produced, Nelson Mandela. It must have been some dinner: the world's best-known former prisoner of conscience with Indonesia's most high-profile political prisoner.

If not Xanana, the other Timorese who could be here is my fellow countryman and Nobel Peace Prize co-Laureate, Bishop Carlos Ximenes Filipe Belo. He is the symbol of the resilience, determination, courage and generosity of the Timorese Church, a church which has always stood with the people, guiding it over the ages, through good and bad times, through war and in times of peace.

Xanana and Belo would stand here at ease. They could more eloquently than I elaborate on the topic of this evening. I shall try to the best of my ability not to embarrass them or my other countrymen and women.

The 1996 Nobel Peace Prize was not a tribute to the work and commitment of just two people. No single individual has the exclusivity of dedication and determination to pursue this often lonely struggle through the years.

The Prize was in reality an honour to the struggling Timorese people, young and old, women and men, who have given their lives for the cause of peace and self-determination; Bishop Carlos Belo's predecessor, the late Dom Martinho da Costa Lopes, the countless unnamed priests and nuns, layworkers of our generous and humble Church; the students and school teachers; civil servants and taxi drivers; the brave freedom fighters in the mountains of my homeland, and the activists of the underground resistance. These are the true heroes who have been honoured by the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize.

But our work would have been even more lonely had it not been for the selfless support of our friends around the world. In these long and hard 22 years since freedom was stolen from us, our friends of all walks of life in all five regions of the world have helped us, fed us, gave us their beds, dedicated years of their lives to this campaign against injustice. East Timor has been for them a universal cause, a test of humanity's own morality.

A few months ago, I received in a letter jointly signed by Elie Wiesel, the 1986 Nobel Peace Laureate, and President Vaclav Havel, with an invitation to participate in a historic gathering in Prague this September under the theme, "Forum 2000: Concerns and Hopes on the Threshold of the New Millennium".

I believe that each of us, as we prepare to enter the Third Millennium, might well wish to reflect on the past, particularly the last hundred years of human history. We have seen extraordinary achievements at every level of human activity, but also extraordinary feats of excess and brutality rising from the darker side of human nature. It has indeed been, as the noted British historian Eric Hobsbawm has said, an Age of Extremes.

But the extremes stretch even further back. From the time when daring Portuguese navigators sailed out of the Tagus river in early 15th century, to the Apollo missions in the 60s, the advances in transport and communications technology have been astounding. But such scientific and technological progress also brought about incalculable destruction and suffering. The slave trade which uprooted an estimated 10 million Africans from their homes and villages in West Africa was made possible in part by the scientific knowledge acquired in sea voyage. When they were not taken from their homes, their homes were taken from them: the genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas, Africa and Australia must also be weighed in our reflection.

However, the magnitude of the destruction brought about by human beings did not begin and end with the slave trade and colonisation. The genocide of the Armenians by the Ottoman Empire, the Jewish Holocaust in the 40s, apartheid in South Africa and the Chinese occupation and destruction of Tibet are among the most serious crimes of this century.

Helen Fein, a leading authority on genocide, in a recent Newsweek article (August 4, 1997, p. 2), identified a long list of countries where at least "partial" genocide has taken place in the past 50 years: Burundi, Sudan, Uganda, Cambodia, East Timor, Ethiopia, Iraq and Bosnia, among others.

The immorality of the arms trade

Crimes occur in places far away from the peaceful and prosperous shores of nations like Australia, but in reality, these are the same countries who most encourage it.

Since the end of World War II, more than 20 million people in the developing world have died as a direct result of the sale of weapons from the rich nations of the North to the less affluent nations of the South.

In May this year in New York I joined Oscar Arias, the former president of Costa Rica and fellow Nobel Peace Laureate, Elie Wiesel (1986 Nobel Peace Prize), His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1989), and many other Laureates in launching the International Code of Conduct on Arms Transfers.

This is the first initiative by a commission of Nobel Peace Laureates we have established to promote peace, and we will press the U.N., the U.S., the EU and all arms-producing countries to adopt it. If adopted, it would ban weapons transfers to countries that do not comply with international human rights standards, international humanitarian principles and the rule of law.

The international arms trade is a problem of a magnitude that needs to be addressed urgently. The sale of conventional arms to the developing world, totalled US$21 billion in 1995. Wealthy nations, including Australia, accounted for 93% of all weapons exports in 1994. The United States alone accounted for well over half, at 56%.

In 1993, the U.S. exported 73% of all arms sold to the developing world. Ninety per cent of the recipients were not democracies, and two-thirds were characterised by the U.S. State Department as human rights violators. In 1994, total military expenditure in the developing world totalled US$242 billion.

These are the countries that can least afford the high-tech implements of death being marketed by the rich democracies of the North. In the developing world, 1.3 billion people are unable to meet their most basic needs. Two million children die annually of preventable or curable diseases; 192 million children are malnourished, and 900 million people cannot read or write.

The five Permanent Members of the Security Council -- who are supposed to guarantee peace and security in the world -- are the ones who most fuel the arms race, who most profit from the sale of weaponry, and who contribute most to the rise in internal suppression and external conflict.

All living Nobel Peace Laureates have joined us on the commission in our effort to impose some control, some ethics, into this trade in the weaponry -- if there can be any ethics at all in such a business.

Aboriginal rights and Native Title

Sometimes we must recognise that atrocities begin at home. I do not have much in common with my fellow Visiting Professor Paul Keating. But I do recall in December 1993 seeing news reports of his Redfern speech on television, in which an Australian prime minister for the first time -- and without being asked -- admitted and apologised for the abominable crimes committed against the original inhabitants of this continent.

I was struck by the courage of this prime minister, and was moved as I later read his emotive and conciliatory words. At that point, I was ready to overlook our fundamental differences on Indonesia and East Timor.

That was the speech of a statesman. That was leadership.

If Australia can demand an apology from Japan for the aggression of World War II, if the U.S. can apologise for the jailing of Japanese-Americans during the war in the Pacific, and if Willy Brandt can fall on his knees in Jerusalem and apologise for the Holocaust, I cannot find any rational reason why Australian leaders utter a simple sentence "I am sorry" for abhorrent acts that were taking place as late as 1971.

Apologising is a show of maturity, self-confidence and generosity. They are attributes that elevate a country in the eyes of the world.

To say that an apology promotes a "black-armband" view of history is a bankrupt argument. Such an argument itself promotes -- as the historian Henry Reynolds has said -- a "white blindfold" view of history. And to seek to deny the native title rights of Aborigines, who have after all gained them fairly and through the due process of law -- white man's law -- is meanness.

The progress in the human rights struggle

In looking at our past, we must also recognise that significant advances have been made in the last 50 years in the global struggle for human rights and the rule of law. The international community through the U.N., and regional groups like the European Union and the Organisation of American States, have developed an impressive gamut of binding international legislation as well as mechanisms for the protection of human rights, of the kind that were unthinkable in the past.

Awareness of human rights is now much more widespread than ever before. The victims have learned how to make use of the existing international procedures for protection of human rights. For instance, the U.N. Human Rights Centre in Geneva receives each year some 500,000 letters, reports, faxes and telegrams denouncing cases of human rights violations from every corner of the globe.

As the world becomes a village through the extraordinary revolution in communications and the flow of information, crimes such as the slave trade, colonisation and the genocide of the indigenous peoples are much harder to commit. Gross and systematic abuses of human rights occurring in many countries do not escape public attention.

TV networks like CNN, or the radio transmissions of the BBC World Service as well as other important shortwave broadcasters like Radio Australia, reduce the isolation and distance between peoples and connect millions of them around the world. Tyrants that were once immune to international scrutiny are no longer safe. Human rights abuses taking place in a remote village in East Timor, or in Kalimantan, West Papua, Aceh, Tibet, Burma or Bougainville, soon find their way into the airwaves, or are revealed to the world through the Internet.

As much as the struggle for human rights and the rule of law remain a still daunting task, I am optimistic. Because every day that goes by, the world is becoming smaller and smaller for tyrants.

There are those in power, particularly in this region of the world, who are attempting to derail the gains made by the international community, to roll back the freedoms won by humanity in the last century. In the recent meeting of ASEAN countries and their Western partners in Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia and Indonesian Foreign Minister Alatas declared war on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Both claimed that this profound and historic document, perhaps one of the jewels of the Enlightenment, is merely a minority viewpoint.

This is the time for us to celebrate the coming 50th anniversary of this document as an achievement. Instead we are being challenged -- by Mahathir, Suharto, Lee Kuan Yew, Li Peng, the SLORC regime in Burma, Rafsanjani in Iran and Saddam Hussein in Iraq -- to revise the Universal Declaration in order to accommodate the views of these gentlemen. Asia, they say, has a concept of human rights and cultural values that is different from those from Europe, Latin America and Africa.

These are not new arguments. In the first three decades following the adoption of the Universal Declaration, the Stalinist regimes of Eastern and Central Europe, led by the Soviet Union, fought an ideological battle against U.N. human rights bodies. We heard from the Communist Bloc that human rights and fundamental freedoms were merely a Western concept, and that their people believed in collective rights. Obviously they failed to ask their populations.

Ironically, with the collapse of the Communist Bloc, this argument has been appropriated by certain Asian regimes: a mixed bag of military dictatorships, Islamic autocrats with a perverse interpretation of the Koran, and the last of the remaining Stalinist dinosaurs.

Democratic governments of the North and South -- as well as NGOs inside those countries -- must summon inspiration and resources for a concerted strategy to defeat this ridiculous notion and advance the cause of universal human rights. Only such an alliance will defeat the forces of tyranny that persist in denying millions of people around the world the basic human rights and fundamental freedoms enjoyed in the wealthier nations of the North.

This is not a conflict between the rich North and the impoverished South. It is a struggle of principles between fully-fledged democracies, who rule with the consent of their people, and the Stalinist and quasi-dictatorial regimes, who do not.

But human rights are not just a moral imperative. Human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law are also the only real guarantee of peace and stability of the kind necessary for economic progress. Ultimately, a repressive regime that oppresses its people, denies the right of workers to form independent trade unions, suppresses academic freedoms and the freedom of expression, is not a reliable economic partner.

In an authoritarian or totalitarian state without an elected parliament, an independent judiciary, a free and dynamic media -- corruption becomes pervasive. It saps the resources of the country. Personal and family fortunes are accumulated, and the gap between rich and poor become wider and wider. Eventually, these explode into social upheavals. And social upheavals are not good for business.

Human rights and national interest

I can understand the difficulties many nations face in managing inter-state relations in a changing and volatile world, a world that is more competitive and interdependent. I imagine ourselves in political and business leadership in a free and independent East Timor, trying to reconcile the many and often conflicting interests in relation to other countries.

But I believe that the national interest cannot be solely defined by the terms of trade. A nation is truly worth its name if it can be respected for its independence and integrity, adherence to ethics and principle in its dealings with other countries, and be prepared to politely but firmly disagree with its friends.

If the prestige and influence of a country derives solely from its size, its economic and military might, then Australia should have easily defeated Portugal in the tight race for a seat in the U.N. Security Council in October last year. There were two vacant seats for the Western Group, and three contestants: Portugal, Sweden and Australia. Sweden got in on the first ballot. On the eve of the crucial second vote, the Australian ambassador to the U.N., Richard Butler, was supremely confident that Australia would win -- by 135 votes to be precise.

After all, how could tiny Portugal measure up to Australia in terms of size and economic clout? And surely Australia could count on some solidarity from the Commonwealth, as well as an element of reward for all those years of appeasing Asian dictatorships.

Australia did have one major advantage over Portugal. On the basis of proportional geographic representation, the two Security Council seats should have been divided between one European and one Pacific region country.

Still, in the end, Portugal won by more than 50 votes. So much for that theory.

For the new Australian government, it was a humiliating defeat at the hands of a small European country usually derided by Foreign Affairs bureaucrats in Canberra. Portugal's dignified stance on the issue of East Timor played a part in its victory. There were certainly other factors. But when it came to matters of principle, what evidence could Australia tender to the world?

Small countries like Norway, Sweden, Ireland, The Netherlands, Portugal, Costa Rica -- to mention but a few -- carry considerable influence in multilateral organisations, but not because of their size or economic clout. They have gained respect and influence from following a coherent policy of standing up for human rights and the interests of the poorer countries of the South.

The promotion of human rights might sometimes require a public and frank statement reflecting concern. Or it might require measures a little more drastic. And, as is the case in life, we sometimes win, and we sometimes lose. At times we have to pay a certain price for that which we believe in.

As a young man back in East Timor, I remember hearing the dramatic story of the 1973 Arab oil embargo. Country after country succumbed to the blackmail and, as OPEC demanded, boycotted Israel. Even Japan caved in. But one tiny European country was at one point the centre of world attention. The whole world watched and waited the Dutch decision as to whether it would bow to OPEC. But the Netherlands stood firm, and we all admired the courage of this small nation. At stake was the survival of another small nation whose people had been persecuted and humiliated for hundreds of years. It would have been much easier and expedient for the Dutch to sacrifice Israel in the altar of Realpolitik and pragmatism. But it didn't.

The Jewish Holocaust and Realpolitik

The Jewish Holocaust could have been prevented by the major powers of the time, namely the U.S., France and the U.K. Reports of persecution of Jews in Germany and elsewhere in Europe were reaching European capitals and Washington. There were confidential reports warning about the rising tide of Nazism and the persecution of Jews.

In 1939, a boat carrying 900 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany was anchored off Florida waiting for clearance to land. After two weeks they were told that were not welcome and the boat was turned back.

The prevailing policy at the time in the U.S. and U.K. was that Hitler should not be confronted. Appeasement was the preferred option, dictated by Realpolitik. The Jews were after all an expendable people in the grand scheme of national interests. More than six million Jews and hundreds of thousands of gipsies were murdered because those who could have stopped such evil chose appeasement instead.

It was pragmatism that drove the West to support Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War in the 80s. For the practitioners of Realpolitik, Saddam Hussein was a moderating influence in the Gulf region that could contain the spread of Islamic fundamentalism from Iran.

Even when the world watched in horror the gassing of thousands of Iranian Kurdish women and children by the Iraqi air force, the West continued to chose pragmatism over principle.

As late as February 1990, U.S. and European diplomats were busy at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights trying to stop a draft resolution critical of Iraq. They argued that significant progress in human rights was being made by Iraq. Only a few months later, Saddam Hussein suddenly became the devil incarnate when his troops invaded Kuwait.

The struggle for human rights in the Asia-Pacific region

The movement for democracy, human rights and rule of law is irreversible. Even in this region, unprecedented events are taking place.

The overthrow of the military dictatorship in South Korea is of enormous significance for democracy and the rule of law in the entire Asian region. The brave people of Korea who endured decades of dictatorship, won the struggle for democracy by peacefully confronting the troops in the streets of Seoul and Kwangju.

For the first time in the history of Asia, former heads of states and other leaders are being prosecuted for crimes committed whilst in office. South Korea has challenged the myth of national security interest, which allows leaders to imprison, torture and murder with impunity.

It is ironic that the government of Fidel Ramos has joined its ASEAN partners in the campaign against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, when the Philippines owes its restored democracy to the relentless struggle of its own people for human rights and the rule of law. In the course of their struggle, the Philippines appealed for and received international support. However, those in power today have forgotten if not betrayed the principles and values for which thousands of Filipinos gave their lives.

The situation in Burma

The situation in Burma demands action beyond the annual ritual of the U.N. General Assembly and Commission on Human Rights resolutions.

The military junta in Burma, which has refused to give power to a government democratically elected by its people, has defrauded the Burmese people and the international community and should be denied a seat in the U.N. General Assembly, as the South African apartheid regime was in the past.

In the late 70s, ASEAN countries, supported by the U.S., also succeeded in blocking recognition of the government installed in Phnom Penh following the intervention of Vietnam in 1978.

If the international community wishes to move beyond rhetoric and send a clear signal to the SLORC junta, the denial of its credentials by the General Assembly Credentials Committee is a course of action that must be considered. The massacre of the Armenian people by the Ottoman Empire, the Jewish holocaust, the wanton killing of the gipsies by the Nazis and the genocide of indigenous peoples in so many regions of the world, stand out as the most barbaric and shameful chapters of human history. Unfortunately, humanity has allowed similar crimes to continue till this very day.

Justice Robert Jackson, Chief Prosecutor of the Nuremberg War Crime Tribunals, once said:

> The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant and so devastating, that civilisation cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated.

The continuing persecution of the Kurds and the denial of their rights, the slaughter of more than one million peasants and Chinese merchants by the Suharto regime in Indonesia in 1965-66, the mass killings perpetrated by the Pol Pot regime on the Cambodian people, the tragedy in the Great Lakes region, the barbaric violence inflicted on the Timorese and the peoples of West Papua, Moslems of Aceh, indigenous peoples of Kalimantan, Sulawessi and the Moluccas, the repression of Palestinian rights -- these are an indictment of the entire international community.

These crimes are continuing because those in government allow them to happen. The Jewish Holocaust occurred because the major powers chose pragmatism and appeasement over moral leadership and humanity. The defenceless Jews who were marched to their deaths were a mere footnote to the apologists of Realpolitik and pragmatism in their pursuit of appeasement towards Hitler.

East Timor and the Cold War context

East Timor is another such example. But one needs to understand the geopolitical landscape of the time.

You might recall a picture that made headlines in the spring of 1975. I am referring to the picture of an American helicopter landing on the rooftop of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon to rescue remaining diplomats, CIA operatives and the few privileged South Vietnamese stooges as the city fell to the Vietcong. Cambodia and Laos followed. This picture illustrated better than a thousand words the ignominious American retreat from Indochina.

It was in this geopolitical context that President Gerald Ford and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, visited Jakarta in early December 1975 as part of a tour to reassure Asian leaders that the U.S. would continue to honour its security commitments in Asia.

The invasion of East Timor, which began within hours of Ford's departure from Jakarta, was a mere footnote in the geopolitical history of 1975. The tens of thousands of Timorese who died in the days, weeks, months and years that followed were mere footnotes in the history books of the Vietnam and Cold wars.

In June 1974 I visited Jakarta, in my capacity as Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the Timorese Social Democratic Association, which had been created less than a month earlier. I had the privilege of meeting with the then Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Adam Malik. After our third round of talks, Mr Malik addressed to me a letter which read in part:

The independence of every country is the right of every nation, with no exception for the people of (East) Timor; ...whoever will govern in Timor in the future after independence can be assured that the government of Indonesia will always strive to maintain good relations, friendship and co-operation for the benefit of both countries.

In April 1975, I again visited Indonesia and met with President Suharto's senior adviser, General Ali Murtopo, to whom I reiterated our desire to develop friendly relations with Indonesia. Gen. Murtopo assured me that Indonesia harboured no territorial ambitions over East Timor. Our mistake was to believe these assurances.

Human rights violations

More than two decades after the Indonesian invasion of 7 December 1975, the problem of East Timor has not disappeared. In 1991, a video camera in the hands of a courageous journalist recorded for the eyes of the world one of the many massacres that have taken place in my country since.

The massacre of 271 Timorese civilians in Dili on 12 November 1991 was not an isolated incident. It followed a well-documented pattern of gross and systematic human rights abuses in many parts of East Timor perpetrated by members of the Indonesian armed forces. The highest-ranking officers in the Indonesian army, in particular, the elite Special Forces Command (Kopassus) and its commander, Brigadier-General Prabowo, had full knowledge of, and took active part in, these operations.

The arrogance and brutality of the Indonesian army in East Timor was once again demonstrated on 23 March this year when a peaceful assembly of young Timorese was fired on by the army. During a visit to East Timor by the U.N. Secretary-General's personal Representative, Ambassador Jamsheed Marker of Pakistan, a group of 250 Timorese students went to the Hotel Mahkota in Dili to deliver a petition to Mr. Marker.

While most students waited outside, a small delegation entered the hotel at about 7 am, requesting to see Ambassador Marker. They were met by an aide to Mr. Marker who received the petition. Following the meeting, Indonesian troops and police opened fire on the students at the hotel. Bayonets and batons were also used against them. Four students were killed and at least 20 are seriously injured.

There is a wealth of evidence which illustrates the routine use of ill-treatment and torture by the Indonesian military. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary and Arbitrary Executions, Mr. Bacre Waly Ndiaye of Senegal, who visited East Timor in July 1994, has detailed a pattern of widespread abuses in my country.

His report was preceded by an earlier report by the then Special Rapporteur on Torture, Prof. Peter Kooijmans of the Netherlands, who happened to be in Dili on 12 November 1991.

The U.S. State Department annual report devotes a large section on the human rights situation in East Timor and I commend it for the honest effort in presenting the tragic reality that is life in the territory.

In April of this year the U.N. Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution condemning Indonesia's human rights violations in East Timor, by a majority of 20 against 14 with 18 abstentions. This is the first open vote since 1983.

Through such resolutions, the international community sends a clear message to the Indonesian military regime that its brutal occupation of East Timor, torture, summary executions, arbitrary arrests and disappearances must come to an end.

Self-determination

The right of the people of East Timor to self-determination is widely recognised in several U.N. General Assembly and Security Council resolutions.

Colonised for almost 500 years by the Portuguese, it is a nation that has forged a strong cultural and religious identity; an identity that in its current form is older the history of white settlement in Australia, and predates by more than two centuries the birth of the United States. East Timor is a nation with an identity that is older than most Latin American and African states.

Our demand for self-determination -- to shape our own destiny and pursue our own unique way of being -- is not a threat to Indonesia. No one could seriously suggest that it ever has been.

But I can understand the concern of countries to preserve their national unity and territorial integrity. Many developing nations, Indonesia being a prime example, experienced a traumatic nation-building process, with numerous attempts from within and without to undermine the unity of the state.

But the way forward is for governments to be sensitive and wise about the basic demands of their own people. In most cases, these demands are not for secession. They ask to be allowed to survive as a

people with a language and a culture. They ask that their land and environment be protected from rapacious multinationals.

The CNRM Peace Initiative

For more than 20 years now, I have argued for a peaceful resolution of the East Timor conflict through dialogue between us and the Indonesian side. These views haven't changed.

Our imprisoned leader, Xanana Gusmão, has proposed and reiterated time and again our very basic stance. We remain ready to enter into a process of dialogue with the Indonesian authorities, under the auspices of the United Nations, without pre-conditions, to explore all possible ideas towards a comprehensive settlement of the conflict.

In 1992, I articulated a peace proposal, which I believe to be a sound and reasonable way in which to end the conflict. This peace initiative was first outlined when I addressed the Sub-Committee on Human Rights of the E.U. in April 1992 and it remains valid today. Allow me to summarise it.

Phase One: This should take up to two years to be fully implemented, and would involve all three parties working with the U.N. to implement a wide range of "confidence building measures", but would not deal with the core of the problem, which is the issue of self-determination.

These include a ceasefire, reduction in troop presence to 1,000 over six months, withdrawal of all heavy weapons and combat aircraft, the unconditional release of all political prisoners, the opening of U.N. agency offices in the territory, a lifting of all media control by the army, freedom of political activity, the removal of restrictions on the teaching of Portuguese, and the appointment of a resident representative of the U.N. Secretary-General.

I believe these could be implemented immediately without loss of face for Indonesia. In fact, its international standing would improve significantly and its presence in the territory be less resented, thus relieving a very tense situation.

Phase Two: Lasting between five and 10 years, this would be a period of genuine political autonomy based on ample powers vested in a local, democratically-elected Territorial People's Assembly.

Initiatives include: the legalisation of political parties, including those advocating independence; opening of an E.U. legation headed by a senior Portuguese official; U.N.-supervised elections for a Territorial Assembly, with only Timorese being allowed a vote, and a Governor elected by the Assembly, both with a term of five years; the establishment of independent trade relations with foreign countries; the power to promulgate laws affecting investment, land ownership, property and immigration; the withdrawal of the remaining Indonesian troops, and their replacement with a U.N.-trained police force; a reduction in the number of Indonesian civil servants; and the normalisation of relations between Indonesia and Portugal.

At the end of the second phase, the autonomous status of the territory could be extended by mutual accord. Seven years would have elapsed since this peace initiative was effected.

The Timorese people, having enjoyed a period of peace and freedom without the presence of the most hated symbol of the occupation, the army, might accept to continue this form of association. Conversely, the changing generation, attitudes and perceptions in Indonesia might also result in Indonesia accepting as natural that East Timor becomes independent. Which takes us to ...

Phase Three: When all parties agree that Phase Three should enter into effect, then the U.N. prepares a referendum on self-determination to resolve the final status of the territory.

Our vision of an independent East Timor

If in a referendum under U.N. supervision the people of East Timor vote for independence, we will create a nation founded on the highest principles of international law, good governance and human rights.

We will not have a standing army, but rely on a Treaty of Neutrality to be guaranteed by the Permanent Members of the Security Council. We will declare the seas surrounding us to be a Zone of Peace and Development, and promote a total demilitarisation of the East Asia and Pacific regions. We will ratify all international human rights treaties, establish a fully representative democracy with a free media, and proclaim a general amnesty as the first step toward national reconciliation.

We will provide free education and health care, funded by money that would otherwise have been used to maintain a standing army. The estimated 200,000 Indonesians who have migrated to our country, most of them poor, will be welcome to stay, and with us help build a better home.

Relations with Australia

While we will always have a special relationship with Portugal, we will also seek close ties with Australia. The majority of the Timorese outside the country reside here, where they have found a home away from home, and much support. We are all grateful for the generosity of Australians, and the bonds forged during World War II and in the last two decades will last for ever.

The way forward

No one is free from responsibility in the East Timor tragedy. Portugal, Australia, Japan, the U.S., the U.K., France, the United Nations -- these have all failed the people of East Timor.

However, as much as we can assign blame to these countries, we can also understand their motives, their fears and even their indifference. Portugal was severely handicapped by its own internal upheaval in the post-empire period of the 1970s. The U.S., having just been forced into a humiliating retreat from Vietnam, was not in a position to play any leadership role on this issue even if it wanted to. My point here is that it would serve no useful purpose to assign blame to any particular country.

We, the Timorese political leaders, cannot escape our own collective responsibility. In 1974-75, we were immature and irresponsible. Some of us introduced certain political rhetoric that alarmed Jakarta. Indonesian leaders were worried about the rise of anything that looked like communist influence in the territory. The traumatic 1965-66 turmoil in Indonesia and the post-Vietnam realities profoundly impacted upon the policy-makers in Jakarta.

But in all this, there is one single truth: the only victims were the people of East Timor. And more than two decades since Indonesia's invasion, the people of East Timor remain victims. They remain captive to the traumatic but now distant memory of Vietnam, captive to a Cold War that no longer exists.

They have made it abundantly clear that no amount of force will ever be enough to subjugate their will. That nothing will overcome their desire to be the masters of their own destiny.

I can only hope and pray that those in power in Indonesia can summon enough courage, humility and inspiration -- looking back upon their own epic struggle for independence from the Dutch – and change course on East Timor.

A few weeks ago I travelled at short notice to South Africa. I was summoned by President Mandela for an informal discussion following his historic two-hour meeting with Xanana Gusmão. President Suharto displayed wisdom and statesmanship in acceding to Mandela's request to meet Xanana.

While I cannot elaborate on my conversation, or on Xanana's conversation with President Mandela, I can say that we welcome President's Mandela intervention. We can all hope that this is the beginning of a new impetus in the U.N.-mediated efforts to bring about a resolution of the conflict in East Timor.

The end of empires

The world has changed dramatically in the last few years and the theories of irreversibility and status quo of the modern nation-state have been discredited by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Who would have thought it possible that the great Armenian people, persecuted for hundreds of years, would regain a country called Armenia?

It once seemed as if the entire world conspired against the Eritrean people in their 30-year struggle against Ethiopia. Today, Eritrea is a nation, and a shining example to the rest of the world.

Who would have thought that when the playwright Vaclav Havel was again arrested in a cold Prague morning in January 1989, that by the end of that year he would be residing in the presidential palace?

Only a decade ago, few would have imagined that a political prisoner languishing in jail for 27 long years would one day emerge as the President of a new South Africa.

Nelson Mandela is the living proof that nothing is irreversible, no regime is eternal, and empires do not last for ever.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.